

Five votes to cheer
Lawmakers keep prison industries intact
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Californians who would like to see improvements in the state's dysfunctional prison system should take a moment to thank five members of the Legislature.

State Sens. Wesley Chesbro, Dennis Hollingsworth and Denise Ducheny and Assembly members John Laird and Judy Chu of the Joint Conference Committee on Budget deserve credit for rejecting Assembly language that would have ended the state's long-standing policy requiring state agencies to purchase prison-made products and services. The votes of the five lawmakers saved California's prison industry program from a stealth attempt by Assemblyman Rudy Bermudez and members of Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 4 to gut the Department of Corrections' only financially self-supporting program.

That means the Senate's version of the bill advances, which keeps the current system as it is.

This is why we have a Senate and a system of checks and balances.

Certainly there's plenty of room to debate improvements to the state's prison industry program, which keeps prisoners busy at real work and aims at reducing the idleness, boredom and restlessness that cause disciplinary problems in any prison. The Bureau of State Audits made recommendations in December 2004 and the **Prison Industry Authority** has responded. Legislators should look at what progress has been made. But that debate should occur openly and be treated as a policy matter.

That's not what Bermudez and friends were about. They craftily buried a provision - issue number 369, page 186 - in a must-pass budget bill making it difficult for anyone in the public to track.

The action by the conference committee late last Thursday turned back this calculated sneak attack on programs that keep prisoners occupied and prisons governable. The system of checks and balances worked - this time. But those who oppose prison industry programs will try again. Supporters will have to remain vigilant.

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